



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

6422
98.805

WIDENER



HN USRM I

Neth 6422.98.805

Harvard College Library



**GIFT OF
THE AUTHOR**

Guido Gezelle

*The Mystic Poet
of Flanders*



GUST. L. VAN ROOSBROECK



THE KRUSE PUBLISHING CO.
VINTON, IOWA
1919

Guido Gezelle

*The Mystic Poet
of Flanders*



GUST. L. VAN ROOSBROECK



THE KRUSE PUBLISHING CO.
VINTON, IOWA
1919



Lecture given before the "Kauwa Club"
University of Minnesota.
April, 1919.



Respectfully dedicated to
Professor E. W. Olmsted
*A tribute to his discerning and sympathetic
understanding of European Letters*

	Page
I. Flemish Literature	9
II. Guido Gezelle, the Man	23
III. Guido Gezelle, the Artist	34
IV. Guido Gezelle, the Mystic	58

I. Flemish Literature.

The West Flanders fields and meadows, where the epic of the world war saw enacted so many of its dramas, now lie before our imagination as a desert of devastation, a plain of bloody mud, where slow traveling clouds, the smoke of burning cities, obscure the horizon. The fields, kneaded by the unceasing tramp of armies stretch out as a limitless waste, where white crosses mark the thousands of graves, where the black-veiled of Flanders come to pray by eventide. . . It was around the Yser, in the low plain of West-Flanders, that many of the most resounding blows of the world war were struck. There the Belgian army stood for years shielding desperately from the invader the last remnant of their country, obstinately clinging to the villages saved after the German onrush of 1914. Now the blackened walls of the ruined towns, Dixmude, Rousselaere and Ypres, stand in their tragic beauty as monuments of the great Crime.

But the fields of Flanders, healed by time, will flourish again as a flowering garden, built up anew by the invisible hands of nature. This desolated country will be restored to its former beauty: the blue flax fields, the golden waving wheat on the slopes, the soft green pastures, the patches of purple clover carpeting the undulating hills, the white

roads winding between rows of poplars, the blurred mirrors of the ponds, stretching under an iridescent sky, bathed in the prismatic light sifting thru the restless drifts of silky white clouds. And against the blue horizon is silhouetted a distant town, quietly reposing on the hillside, with its Gothic spires and Flemish gables clear-cut in the golden shimmer of evening, delicate and finely delineated like an old etching.

This characteristic landscape of South Flanders, these fields and hills and meadows found, before the war, a poet to love them in all their aspects, to incarnate their very soul in his songs: GUIDO GEZELLE.

In consecrating a few pages to him—the first introduction so far as I am aware, of his work to America—I am merely performing a duty to an artist of originality and power to whom the world has paid scant homage. In Holland and Flanders he is now hailed as a poet whose work is part of this most winnowed choice of spiritual grain: the best poetry of the 19th century. Yet his very name is unknown, in English-speaking countries, even to many students of literature, however catholic and sympathetic their tastes. We can account for this neglect by the fact that Gezelle wrote in the almost untranslatable dialect of West Flanders, and that, until recent years, he was misunderstood, even in his own country.

To supply the proper background for the appreciation of his work, it is necessary to repeat some facts about Belgium, its languages and literatures: Belgium is a bilingual country. Flemish, a tongue only slightly different from Dutch, is spok-

en in the northern part of the country and in some districts of France, around Hasebrouck. Walloon, a French dialect, is the tongue of Southern Belgium. French is the official language. Centuries of French influence have left deep traces in Flanders. The Flemish bourgeoisie and the richer classes have adopted French and in many instances, know no more about their Flemish mother-tongue than many Irishmen about Gaelic. The Flemish masses, however, have clung tenaciously to their own speech and have for a century been increasing in numbers.

In America, the modern Belgian literature is known and appreciated especially thru the achievements of two outstanding writers of world-fame: Maeterlinck and Verhaeren. Altho both were Flemings by ancestry and temperament, they wrote in French, like not a few of their countrymen, all more or less well known beyond the narrow limits of their fatherland; Charles de Coster, whose epic of Flanders "Thyl Eulenspiegel," is one of the most remarkable of modern works; Camille Lemonnier, the author of "Un Mâle"; Georges Eeckhoud, whose novels are now being translated into English; Georges Rodenbach, the author of the melancholy story "Bruges-la-Morte"; Charles van Lerberghe, the most gifted and refined of French-writing Flemings; Max Elskamp, Eug. Demolder, Victor Kinon, Georges Ramaeckers, Thomas Braun and many others. But the Flemish literature of French expression, luxuriantly flourishing as it is, represents only one side of the literary production of Belgium. The literature in Flemish has been meritorious and of commanding interest since the Middle Ages. In modern times, it has produced poets of

robust lyrical power or exquisite refinement as well as prose writers of original merit. For various reasons, the difficulties of the language, for instance, their works have scarcely been brought before the international public. "There is," says an English critic, Sir John Bowring, "a country within sight of the shores of our island whose literature is less known to us than that of Persia or Hindostan, a country, too, distinguished for its civilization, and its important contributions to the mass of human knowledge. . . . It is indeed most strange, that while the poets of Germany have found hundreds of admirers and thousands of critics, those of a land nearer in position, more allied by habit and history with our thoughts and recollections, should have been passed by unnoticed". These words need few changes to be applied to America, especially as far as the modern Flemish authors are concerned.

The reader will perhaps raise the question: Why do some of the Flemish authors insist on writing in Flemish, a tongue so limited in use? Why do they not follow the larger and easier road to success, international fame and wealth, which Maeterlinck and Verhaeren followed, by writing in French, which for most of them has become a second mother tongue? Why write in the speech of the lower and the middle classes of Flanders, neglecting the richer French-speaking bourgeoisie?

In the first place, these writers in Flemish are the literary sponsors of a movement seeking a homogeneous Flemish culture, the "Flemish movement," the important political aspects of which fall outside the scope of these pages, which are de-

voted exclusively to Flemish literature. Besides the inspiration drawn from the strong race-consciousness of the Flemings, there exists a social reason: Flemish writers care little for success in foreign countries so long as their own people can not read their works. Maeterlinck for instance, is read only by the intellectuals among the Flemings. The real Flemish-speaking people, the working and middle classes hardly know his name, which years ago crossed the Atlantic. Verhaeren, who has admirably sung the Flemish masses, the workers, the peasants and the manifold aspects of his country, is not read at all by them. In the literary sense he is almost a foreign author in Flanders itself. The Flemish authors prefer to be appreciated first by their own people, to lift them up to a higher intellectual level. They are contented to forego international fame and consequent material advantages. It is worth pointing out, however, that the Flemish-reading public is not so small as commonly supposed. Flemish and Dutch being practically the same tongue it numbers about ten millions.

And finally, the Flemish authors claim artistic justification for the use of their mother tongue. "Why do we write Flemish," says Prof. Vermeylen, "we, who, all of us, could just as easily compose a facile essay in French? Because we feel that our language is an inner necessity of our art. One could ask just as well: Why do you write at all? We spoke the Flemish tongue in our father's home with the mother who reared us; thru the medium of this language she gave us all that she could give us. This language was born at the same time as our thoughts, and it can

never be erased from our individuality. Our pastures and our woods, all our evenings and mornings with their meadows and clouds are painted with the very colour of our Flemish words; they are surrounded with the same imponderable atmosphere; each word we pronounce links us more intimately with the very earth of Flanders from which we grew. Who can explain the love for the mother tongue? We find in this language so many, so many unexplainable things, far remembrances and harmonies, all rooted in the deepest intimacy of our "self". The simplest things as the highest can only be adequately and organically expressed in our own mother tongue. . . . And, when a deeper force stirs our souls — an echo, no doubt, of our own loves and tears—but also an angelic foreboding of a mysterious and more perfect life, and when we want to find sounds to express that highest emotion that men have called "God," then again rise from the depth of our being the sounds of our own tongue, which have absorbed the secret life of our purest desires. So long as there are some poets in Flanders who feel this, while writing down the potent words of their forebodings, O my tongue, whether you be official or not, you can not disappear, for you are part of the highest life."

These reasons lay bare the deeper roots of the social, racial and artistic impulses which confirm the Flemish modern authors in the use of their mother tongue. They aspire to be both apostles of their culture and unrestricted artists, and if no wealth is to be derived from their publications, the purity of their motives protects them against the commercialisation of literature with its

consequent lowering of standards, the scourge of the literature of many a greater nation.

The revival of Flemish literature, after three hundred years of relative lack of productivity, began almost a century ago. National and racial consciousness had almost died out in Flanders, "the battle-field of Europe," torn as it was by the guns of all nations, worn out by neverceasing religious strife, made economically powerless by unjust and oppressive treaties. The Flemish tongue itself was decaying and despised by the higher classes, the only depositaries of intellectual culture, as an uncouth "patois." Of all the ancient splendour of Flanders remained but a faint memory. Flemish literature had fallen in to the hands of "Chambers of Rhetoric," where voluble graphomaniacs had enthroned the redundant commonplace and combined in their lame "poetry" all the characteristics of unwieldy dullness and sententious mediocrity. Even painting, surviving so tenaciously in Flanders when other expressions of culture are withering, had become dryly conventional. Flemish life and Flemish art seemed nothing more than a pious memory of a dead past.

After the French revolution and after Napoleon had shaken the very foundations of old-time Europe, a sudden increase of racial feeling burst forth. This was a nationalistic reaction against the internationalist dreams of the "saviours of the human race" of the 18th Century,—which still underlies the present national movements in Poland, Ireland, Bohemia, the former "Italia irredenta," Hungary, etc. Flanders had suffered for centuries too deeply from the domination of various oppressors not to feel the need of racial reconstruction. And it

was from this need that the Flemish movement arose.

During the Napoleonic domination French was proclaimed the official language of the country, which it had in fact become long before that time. After Waterloo, from 1815 till 1830, Belgium and Holland, united, formed the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Dutch became now officially the tongue of the land and the Flemings had the benefit of being governed in a language similar to their own. But the uneducated mass believed Dutch to be as alien a tongue as German or English and, since deep rooted religious and commercial conflicts divided North and South, the advantages of the union with Holland proved illusory. The Flemish Catholics saw in Protestant Holland a danger for their faith and the majority joined whole-heartedly in the anti-Dutch revolution of 1830. French influence was again predominant. The Belgian revolution was, in a sense, a consequence of the French revolt of 1830, which brought Louis-Philippe to the throne. It began in Brussels with the singing of the "Marseillaise" and followed closely the French pattern and its aspirations to a bourgeois-kingdom. And still more was the sympathy for France aroused when a French army re-enforced the rebels and drove the Dutch from Antwerp. One of the very first acts of the Belgian Congress of 1830 was to proclaim French again as the official tongue, while Flemish seemed now definitely crushed out of existence.

It was then that the Flemish movement began, another episode in the revival of the down-trodden races of Europe, which had so potent an influence upon the history of past century. It was conceived

then, on its negative side, as a reaction against foreign and especially French culture, on its positive side as the rebuilding of a real Flemish culture upon the tradition of old Flemish racial splendour. The first leaders, J. F. Willems, Blommaert, Serure and their followers were scholars, versed in the history of Flemish letters, who brought to light again its long buried treasures. They joined hands with a few poets: Ledeganck, Pr. van Duyse, Rens, Nolet de Brauwere and others. Their poetry was above all a clarion call for a national revival. They were apostles of a racial faith, still highly romantic and based upon a sense of reverence for ancestral greatness more than upon the painful present needs of their people. The artistic quality of their work was subordinated to the racial appeal, much in the same way as the productions of the Irish writers of the same period.

For a few years the Flemish revival was limited to these scholarly pursuits and literary experiments, but soon it branched out in two directions: political organization and popular literature. The authors who brought the Flemish movement to the masses were: the improviser in verse, Prudens van Duyse, a prolific author of effervescent facility, to whom, however, the careful excision and chiselling of a poem were alien; K. Ledeganck, whose poem "The three Sister-Cities" sings the glorious past of Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp and loaths all imitations of foreign customs and tongues; Theod. van Rijswyck, a song writer of sprightly wit, the "Béranger of the Flemings."

But none of these was ever so completely the idol of the Flemish people as Hendrick Conscience, the author of a hundred novels "who taught his

people to read." He was the son of a Frenchman and of a Flemish mother, but the Flemish blood of his mother proved the most powerful inheritance he received. His novel "The Lion of Flanders" became the bible of the militant Flemings. It paints the times of glory and bloody violence when the bare-breasted burghers of Bruges routed, in the fields of Courtrai, the masses of the cuirassed French chivalry, who disdained so completely their opponents that they had fastened brooms at their lances "to sweep Flanders clean of dirt." Besides his numerous historical novels he produced ingenious and sentimental sketches of the Flemish folklife, which remain his best title to glory. His works were translated into a number of languages and enjoyed an international fame during the second half of the 19th century. Other novel writers came to his assistance in his patriotic task of giving the Flemings good books in their tongue; De Laet, Sleekx, Van Kerkhoven, etc. And soon, incited by the driving power of nationalism, poets and prose-writers arose everywhere in Flanders while the Flemish movement registered its first political triumphs.

After this first period of Romantic and nationalist poetry, a reaction began against the high-sounding rhetoric, the stilted language and the magniloquent or lachrymose improvisations of the Romantic poets. This movement, essentially "Parnassian" in its preoccupation with form, was started by some "simple" poets, who wrote with greater sincerity and directness about less pretentious subjects: G. Antheunis, Vict. de la Montagne and the dexterous but painfully mediocre Jan Ferguut. Gradually the parnassian current gained force and, with the early work of Pr. van Langendonck and

with Pol de Mont, the then rather provincial atmosphere of Flemish letters was refreshed by fragrant breezes from other European literatures at that moment dominated by the Parnassian tenets of poetry:—restraint, effacement of the artist's personality, objectivity of vision, perfection of sculpturesque form.

Pol de Mont, a wide-open mind of international sympathies, sensitive to all currents of modern literature, was, besides Gezelle, the first poet in Flanders whose only ideal was beauty of thought, feeling and form, "poetry for poetry's sake," instead of poetry in the service of racial or social theories. The eminent Danish historian of literature, Georg Brandes, wrote of his poem "The Children of Men," that it was "a poem which, by the grandeur of its style and energy of its invention, rises to the rank of Byron's biblical poetry and of Leconte de Lisle's poems," and farther: "There is grandeur in it which surpasses Milton's treatment of biblical legends," De Mont's range is wide: he has written novels and verse, lyric and epic; criticism and studies on history of painting, on esthetics and poetical theories. His manifold activities prepared the advent of the modern school. In the early 80's he associated, in Louvain, with the French-Belgian insurgents against traditional poetry, with Verhaeren, Gilkin, Giraud, Max Waller, and with Albrecht Rodenbach, the Flemish poet and leader who died at twenty-six. From the enthusiasms of his youth there remained in him an aspiration towards the renewal of literary forms and, in later years, he always acclaimed generously every new talent. Yet the modern Flemish literature was originated by a new group of writers without his direct interference.

Around the monthly "Van Nu en Straks," gath-

people to read." He was the son of a Frenchman and of a Flemish mother, but the Flemish blood of his mother proved the most powerful inheritance he received. His novel "The Lion of Flanders" became the bible of the militant Flemings. It paints the times of glory and bloody violence when the bare-breasted burghers of Bruges routed, in the fields of Courtrai, the masses of the cuirassed French chivalry, who disdained so completely their opponents that they had fastened brooms at their lances "to sweep Flanders clean of dirt." Besides his numerous historical novels he produced ingenious and sentimental sketches of the Flemish folklife, which remain his best title to glory. His works were translated into a number of languages and enjoyed an international fame during the second half of the 19th century. Other novel writers came to his assistance in his patriotic task of giving the Flemings good books in their tongue; De Laet, Slekx, Van Kerkhoven, etc. And soon, incited by the driving power of nationalism, poets and prose-writers arose everywhere in Flanders while the Flemish movement registered its first political triumphs.

After this first period of Romantic and nationalist poetry, a reaction began against the high-sounding rhetoric, the stilted language and the magniloquent or lachrymose improvisations of the Romantic poets. This movement, essentially "Flemish" in its preoccupation with form, was led by some "simple" poets, who were more sincerity and directness about their subjects: G. Antheunis, etc. It was the dexterous but not the simple. Gradually the path was cleared for the early with the early

with Pol de Mont, the then rather provincial atmosphere of Flemish letters was refreshed by fragrant breezes from other European literatures at that moment dominated by the Parnassian tenets of poetry:—restraint, effacement of the artist's personality, objectivity of vision, perfection of sculpturesque form.

Pol de Mont, a wide-open mind of international sympathies, sensitive to all currents of modern literature, was, besides Gezelle, the first poet in Flanders whose only ideal was beauty of thought, feeling and form, "poetry for poetry's sake," instead of poetry in the service of racial or social theories. The eminent Danish historian of literature, Georg Brandes, wrote of his poem "The Children of Men," that it was "a poem which, by the grandeur of its style and energy of its invention, rises to the rank of Byron's biblical poetry and of Leconte de Lisle's poems," and farther: "There is grandeur in it which surpasses Milton's treatment of biblical legends," De Mont's range is wide: he has written novels and verse, lyric and epic; criticism and studies on history of painting, on esthetics and poetical theories. His manifold activities prepared the advent of the modern school. In the early 80's he associated, in Louvain, with the French-Belgian insurgents against traditional poetry, with Verhaeren, Gilkin, Giraud, Maessenecker, and with Albrecht Rodenbach, the most important poet and leader who died at an early age. The enthusiasms of his youth and the aspiration towards the new literature were not less and, in later years, he encouraged every new talent. The modern Flemish literature was originated and developed without his direct inter-

by "Van Nu en Straks," gath-

ered, in 1893, some young authors of modern tendencies, who set out with high ideals, cultural and literary, and gained general recognition in a few years. "Van Nu en Straks" was soon followed by a new publication "Vlaanderen," which became the most important standardbearer of modern ideals in Flemish literature. It voiced also new aspirations in the Flemish movement. Prof. Vermeylen (Un. of Brussels.) the intellectual leader of Young Flanders, in two influential essays—"Criticism of the Flemish Movement (1895) and "Flemish and European Movements" (1900).—called upon his countrymen to discard their oldfashioned and provincial Romanticism, to conceive their aspirations towards a higher national culture as an episode of the general European race-awakening; as the expression, in thought and acts and art, of strongwilled individuals, who no longer wished to remain "without roots" in their own people, but who aspired to grow up harmoniously from the very earth of their mother country. The ideal was no more to be "Flemings" exclusively, narrow nationalists, but to become "Europeans." In his conception, "Europeanism" was neither an anemic pseudo-culture, an Arlequin-dress of motley patches, borrowed from discordant civilisations, nor the vaguely declamatory adoration of the abstract "genre humain" of the French revolution. To be good Europeans it is not at all necessary to destroy the specific national culture of each people; for European culture is a composite of the very best and highest which each race has produced.

To contribute their share to the European culture the Flemings must then be Flemish before all. They must safeguard their individuality and their own art, but at the same time they must open their

minds to all what is purest in other countries and judge their own achievements, not only by national but by international standards. In a word, he expounded the substitution of an international outlook for one exclusively racial. In literature too the modern school aimed at creating a literary art, strongly Flemish, no doubt, but of international value and appeal. Around the initiators of the new movement soon were grouped all the younger Flemish authors. Among them the realistic novelists Styn Streuvels and Cyriel Buysse are austere artists; Herman Teirlinck and André de Ridder produce stories of subtle psychology; while Prof. Vermeulen's "Wandering Jew" is a work of deep symbolical meaning, which, if translated into one of the leading European languages, would at once take its rank among the most outstanding productions of modern prose. Among the poets Karel van de Woestyne writes plaintive and exquisite poems of ultramodern refinement; Constant Eeckels sings the mystical ecstasies of the Cross; Edmond van Offel publishes songs of delicate mood-painting. A score of other promising poets revealed their talent in the years preceding the war. Literary life is brisk in Flanders and both in French and in Flemish that country has produced works of significance in the literature of modern times.

* * *

Gezelle, however, stood apart, a lonely figure, outside of any school in Flemish literature. Too personal, a product of nature, hardly of book-learning, he realized almost in isolation his work of beauty, misunderstood and persecuted for many decades. "Guido Gezelle is the soul of Flanders" said Hugo Verriest, (Flemish orator and essayist) summing up the characteristics of his poetry, which

fully expresses the complex temper of the Fleming, realistic and sensuous as well as mystical and full of reverence for the Beyond.

Some artists rise above their surroundings and race and their creations are animated by a spirit universally human rather than racial. They do not seem to be bound by any of the ties invented by the literary determinism of Taine, race, environment and epoch. Like much of the Bible their works become at once the common possession of all nations. Goethe's Faust is Man himself, with his relentless struggle between the yearning for knowledge of the critical intellect and the desire of living in simple happiness, rather than merely a German of 1800. Other poets, however, are synthetic expressions of their times and their people. Walt Whitman's poetry is the truthful mirror of the groping and growing, youthful, unformed and powerful American Democracy of the middle of past century, with its confused but high aspirations towards the widest horizon of human future, immense and free like the billowing plains of the West. In the same way Gezelle expresses Flanders and its traditional, mystical and sensuous people. And much of the charm of his work lies precisely in its racial flavor.



II. Guido Gezelle: The Man.

The advent of the younger Flemish school inaugurated a period of decided broadening of literary, national and ethical outlook. The Flemish movement became for the younger Flemings an inspiration towards harmonious self-development at the same time as a social movement in favor of the neglected mass, ideals too lofty to admit of old fashioned enmity towards France. "We must be Flemings to become Europeans, and even citizens of the world" was the thought behind all their work. They aimed at racial emancipation, not for its own sake, but as the necessary basis for an all-inclusive cosmopolitan culture. In literature they aspired at creating superior art, letting each writer work out individually his particular vision of beauty. Besides this they had still another task: the unavoidable revision of the literary judgments of the preceding generation, the recognition of the real outstanding. Flemish authors of the past, measured no longer by racial sentiment, but by standards of purely esthetic merit.

It was a humble priest, Guido Gezelle, who was hailed as the uncrowned king of Flemish poetry. He had been long disregarded by the official critics because he was too individual an artist and did not write in the standard Dutch-

Flemish but in the West-Flemish dialect. He was accused of being a "provincial," whose dangerous freedom with language menaced the Flemish tongue with a relapse into anarchy. In vain had he looked for any sympathy outside the small circle of his own students. The official world persecuted him because he wrote in Flemish and the Flemings themselves for years failed to understand his beautiful but unusual lyrics. For there existed an enormous difference in poetical conception between Gezelle and the poets of his time. The official bards produced a number of over-eloquent patriotic orations in verse in favor of the Flemish movement or sentimental poetry in ultra-romantic style, while Gezelle wrote almost as an individual word-artist, and put into practice all the theories of the modern poets long before the new forms of recent poetry had come into existence. He was a precursor, an innovator. He chose the simplest subjects and translated oftentimes the most refined and elusive impressions into a music faint and diaphanous. His very simplicity seemed superlatively absurd to his fellow poets schooled in the admiration of Victor Hugo, Byron and Schiller. The militant Flemish nationalists did not find in him a ready partisan, for his nature was all goodness and forgiveness and politics of any kind were distasteful to him. He lived in isolation the greater part of his life as a simple undercurate until his monotonous existence was enlivened by the enthusiastic reverence of young literary men impassioned for high culture and refined beauty.

The only critic, in England, who was written at all extensively, on modern Flemish literature, Jethro Bithell, does not seem to have judiciously appreciated Gezelle. The pages he devotes to him

are not only inadequate but not even equitable. He attributes the recognition of the priest-poet largely to local political passions, decrying it as a kind of artificial glorification set up by the Roman Catholic Flemings. The facts, however, have quite a different significance. The first who acclaimed Gezelle, in Belgium, were the younger poets of the "Van Nu en Straks" group, nearly all liberals and free-thinkers. It was also a liberal poet, Pol de Mont, who introduced the country curate and poet of genius to the Dutch public, in 1897, and the enthusiasm of the Dutch, largely protestants and non-catholics can, of course, not be attributed to the influence of the Roman-Catholics. Let us contrast with the opinion of J. Bithell the judgment of even so conservative a scholar and critic as Prof. Kalff, of the University of Leiden, who, in the 7th vol. of his weighty "History of the Literature of the Low Countries" concludes as follows his estimate of Gezelle's value: "Many will honor Gezelle as one of the few great poets to whom our people can point in the 19th century; as one who has strengthened and refined our feeling for nature and opened our eyes to its beauty; as one who has painted the ordered color and the characteristics of the Flemish landscape and country life as nobody before him; as one who in his rich and malleable language expressed inimitably what struck his sensitive eye; as one who thru his splendid images and thru the harmonious melody of his poetry stirs our soul to its very depth." The most celebrated authors and critics of Holland as Willem Kloos, Fred van Eeden, Albert Verwey, are much more lavish with their praise than the reserved scholar Kalff.

This glory came late to Gezelle. He suffered

the fate of most individual artists: he was not understood. It was only at the end of his career that the tardy light of glory crowned his head, that the younger generation acclaimed him as the unequalled master of Flemish poetry. But even after this belated recognition he remained, as before, the unassuming and humble priest he had always been. His uneventful existence among the poor, the half-peasant, half working-man's class to which he and his parents belonged, was now drawing to its close. In one of his poems he describes the old house where he was born in 1830, the year of the separation of Belgium from Holland. It was one of those century-old dwellings which abound in the fields of Flanders: the thatched roof of tawny gold, blackened by rain in velvety and moss-grown patches, sagging low over the whitewashed walls, broken into a thousand capricious crevices; bright green shutters framing the small leaded windows and, all around the house the bronze and saffron tints of the autumn-leaves and the blaze of late red roses. As a gardener's son, he acquired early a love for trees and plants and that direct vision of nature, which we find in his work. He helped in the orchards, pruning and lopping and picking fruit, taking care of the flower garden, where all the varieties of flowers and Dutch orchids burst forth in a riot of glaring color, a sensuous delight for a Fleming, by temperament and tradition a painter. Between him and nature grew up an intimacy which city-bred poets, with their somewhat artificial ecstasies before the "Spectacle of nature," never attain. He sings even the most unnoticed plants and flowers, those that are forgotten by the poets and discarded in favor of the symbolical splendour of roses and lilies. He was a loving child of his people, poor and humble, but

great by his love. In his soul echoed the tales and legends of ancient Flanders. He knew its picturesque folklore, its dialects and history, its superstitions and beliefs. His poetical training was scarcely bookish. He grew up from the very soil of Flanders, and when forced by the superabundance of emotion, he wrote poetry, he used quite naturally the simple but rich and musical dialect of West-Flanders. He had heard it spoken among the plain, hard-working people of his land. He loved its unvarnished directness, its expressiveness and wealth of color. The official, very Dutch-tinted Flemish was for him nothing more than a "literary language," artificial and cold, a dead rhetoric, a musty gathering of second-hand expressions and images. To express Flanders and to paint its nature, he made use of the characteristic Flemish words, which seemed, by some strange magic, to have absorbed the very smell and sound and color of the Flanders fields and orchards.

One further circumstance was very potent in the formation of his psychology: Near to his native hamlet stood that relic of the Middle Ages, Bruges, the city of mystic devotion. Many times his mother led him there to church and his soul grew impregnated with the mystic, mediaeval atmosphere of the former "Venice of the North," fallen from its secular glory. Even now the city is as it was in Gezelle's youth. The time-worn, grey houses lean wearily against one another, almost tottering with age and reflect their crumbling pinnacles in the dark and motionless waters of the canals as in black-marble mirrors. Mysteriously the stone bridges are reproduced in the depth of the water where slowly, as if in dream, glides an immaculate swan. And everywhere there are churches and con-

vents where lingers the dreamy peace of silent sanctuaries.

Bruges has remained an island of the Middle Ages in the ocean of restless modern life. Not only have the houses, the streets and the churches hardly changed since the fifteenth century, but the inhabitants have never been affected by the ideas and aspirations of modern times. The agitated sea of human changes foams and surges around this island without ever submerging it. Some dark, mystical shadow seems to fall from the towers upon the lives of those who reside at their feet, filling their souls with a weird terror of the Beyond. Nowhere has Roman Catholicism, in its most traditional form, laid so strong a hold upon men. Nuns and priests form the majority of the population and in their renunciation of the joys of life, old Bruges seems to expiate its sins of centuries ago, its sins of sensuous pleasure and sumptuous wealth. Gezelle's native instinct of devotion, the inborn mysticism of the Fleming, awoke early in this atmosphere. For him, all the skepticism of modern times remained powerless against the splendour of a religious past. His soul for ever resided in the "Moyen Age énorme et délicat." "The enormous and delicate Middle Ages."

We perceive thus in his early surroundings, the origin of the essential traits of his character and his work: ecstatic love for nature even in its humblest aspects; love for Flanders and its traditions, for the dreams of past generations, living still so potent a life in the tales, the language and the customs of the poor folk and in the decaying beauty of Bruges; an all-pervading Mysticism, at last, in which was rooted his childlike faith. The harmon-

ious blending of these qualities, touched and vivified by the mysterious light of genius, will make him a poet.

Gezelle's parents had dreamed for him the ideal calling for the son of a Flemish peasant the priesthood. And the boy looked upon this future as upon an honour, surrounded with awe and glory, whereto his faith drew him, triumphing over the hesitations of his humility. He was sent, when scarcely twelve years old, to the little seminary of Rousselaere. In exchange for some service as a doorkeeper,—“the humble will be elevated”—he was given free instruction in philosophy as a preparation for theological studies. In 1850 he went to the graduate seminary of Bruges, where he studied for three years, and in 1854, was made a priest. He taught for some time commercial subjects at Bruges but was soon transferred to the more congenial position of teacher of the class of poetry in the seminary of Rousselaere.

His teaching of poetry was as fresh and original as his very being. He wandered consciously, from the beaten path, from the painstaking explanation of a text, from the cold dissection of a poem, cut into small parts, labelled “methaphors,” “thoughts,” “climax,” “moral,” etc. A poem was for him as a many-colored butterfly, to be admired in the radiant sunshine, never to be pinned to a sheet of paper and examined by a magnifying glass; for so we only discover the ugly worm in that delicate winged flower. His admiration for beauty pervaded his explanations and soon he was surrounded by an enthusiastic group of students, whom he equally inspired and instructed. He perfected their esthetic taste, taught them to see and

admire the splendour of the humblest objects, guided them, not exclusively among books and rules, but led them back to nature and to the human heart, sources of all poetry. It is said that he pointed to flowers, the sky, dancing children and the quiver of leaves upon a sunlit wall and cried out: "These and Christ are my esthetic principles, my rules and my books." And lest we smile at this naivete of genius, let us consider how near he stood here to that great poet Saint Francis of Assisi. One of his students, Eug. Van Oye, has described his influence upon them: "You lifted us up in your mighty arms and upon your breast you warmed and woke our souls." Even now, after more than half a century, Hugo Verriest speaks with deep emotion in his lectures about the unforgettable lessons of this unconventional teacher. He was for his students the Master, the hand with the magic keys, opening the gates of a new paradise of poetic inspiration.

But his very originality and power, his influence upon the students, as well as his writing of Flemish verse, aroused the suspicion of his superiors, who, with provincial narrowness of mind, reproached him for not fitting into their Scheme-of-Things. As a disciplinary measure they soon transferred him to a place where he could no longer influence youthful minds, while the bishop gave him the charitable counsel of ceasing to write these verses in a despised idiom, for which so much dangerous enthusiasm was rising everywhere. But for Gezelle poetry was not an academic exercise, a clever achievement, which he could take up or drop at will,—it was his very life. Still, he tried to submit—he tried during 30 years of agony and spiritual strife to silence this voice that sang to him.

Was he not a priest, bound by his vow of obedience? He was heart-broken, far from his students and the congenial surroundings of Rousselaere, embittered by the contempt with which his noblest aspirations were met. His disgrace was a purely arbitrary act on the part of the Roman Catholic authorities and could not be justified by any flaw in his conduct, for he had nothing of the strange demeanor and waywardness popularly ascribed to genius. His was the over-confidence of an upright heart, which in its purity can never conceive how philistinism and indolence, mediocrity and narrow-mindedness are allied at all times to ridicule and choke the noblest impulses of every mind which they can not dwarf. If he had been allowed to grow unhampered, to what heights would he not have risen? His ecclesiastical superiors exiled him to obscure places. From 1861-65 he was attached to an English seminary, became later undercurate in Bruges and Courtrai (Kortrijk) where he lived for 28 years. At the very end of his life, at sixty-nine, he was given at last a better position as director of a nun's cloister at Bruges. "God forgive them, Flanders never will" (Gustaf Verriest). One morning seated by an open window, gazing into the sky of Flanders, which he had sung so many times, he passed away while whispering: 'I always loved so much the gay whistle of the birds'

His death was the sign of his triumph. The official world tried forthwith to wipe out the memory of forty years of underestimation and persecution. Bruges and Courtrai erected statues in his honor, the lower clergy accompanied him in great numbers to the grave, discourses in his praise were pronounced in the Flemish Academy. The undercurate to whom all promotion had been refused

was now glorified as a poet of genius and a martyr of his art.

* * *

Gezelle's first volume: "Vlaamsche Dichtoefeningen" (Flemish Exercises in Poetry), was published in 1858, and contains verse written before and during his professorship at Rousselare. It betrays the poet in the making in many lyrics altogether too traditional in form and impersonal in feeling, but also contains some of his most original and finest work, as, for instance, "Het Rulschen van het ranke Riet." (The Rustling of the restless Reed.) After his disgrace he refused to publish any of the occasional verse which he sent privately to his friends. His pupil, Hugo Verriest, printed, in 1862, "Gedichten, Gezangen en Gebeden" (Poems, Songs and Prayers), which are inferior to his early work. No allusion to his then disturbed life is found in this book, except, perhaps, some scattered lines of lamentation. In 1878, he published "Kerkhofblommen" (Flowers of the Cemetery), written, however, much earlier (1852-58). During the long and dreary years that his poetical gift was dying, he worked strenuously in language-science. He gathered much interesting material for Flemish-Frisian and English-German philology for De Bo's "West Vlaamsch Idiotikon" and edited a review devoted to Flemish folklore and philology "Loquela." His next volume of verse "Liederen, Eeredichten et Reliqua" (1880) reveals only a pale shadow of the former poet. In 1886, he printed a translation of Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha," on which he worked for years, since he was in correspondence with Longfellow about the translation in 1877.

About 1890, when he was sixty years old, the warm admiration of the new literary generation,

fanned the embers of inspiration still smoldering under the ash of years, to new flames. His best work is found in his first volume and in his last publications: "Tijdkrans" (The Crown of Time 1893). "Rijmsnoer om ende om het jaar" (A Garland of Rhymes all around the year, 1897); "Laatste Verzen" (Last Poems. 1899).



III. Guido Gezelle, The Artist.

Mr. Jethro Bithell in his volume of translations "Contemporary Flemish Poetry" translates scarcely four pages from Guido Gezelle, while one hundred pages are devoted to Pol de Mont. He explains: "Gezelle's poetry baffles translation. It is a most delicate web in which all the threads cling to the rhyme; the threads of the idea might be taken over into another language, but the Flemish rhyme, on which all depends, cannot be taken and so the structure of the translation falls asunder." The difficulties in translating Gezelle's elusive rhythms have, however, far deeper roots and are not so exclusively dependent upon the rhyme as Mr. Bithell maintains. Gezelle created a personal vocabulary, as—in a measure—every real poet does, an overrich tongue, popular and artistic at the same time and of a supple plasticity. And, to transcribe his vision, he sometimes invents new words for which no equivalents exist in another tongue. His poetry possesses something immediate like sunlight, rustling leaves and silvery spray; it is music and rhythm,—the immediate voice of the world's beauty—transcribed in words. He sets each letter, each vowel, each clear or darker sound chiming upon one another like a rain of diaphanous music from a string of bells in a cathedral tower. A change of a word or a syllable brings a note

strangely discordant in his music, so delicately poised, so organic in its unity. One feels that what he says could only be adequately expressed only with precisely these sounds and these Flemish words. Thought and feeling and "expression" are ONE in his work. His form is not like a close-fitting garment—a garment which might indeed be cut with infinite care, but still a garment,—it is the very flesh of his poem. It would be as impossible to translate Gezelle adequately as to transcribe music into a different medium. Besides, the simplicity of his subjects must necessarily degenerate into the common-place in any translation, because the foreign language can not supply that subtle radiance which is all the smiling freshness of the original. Prose-translations are only given here and they will show, I am painfully aware, hardly more than grey outlines instead of the living colored picture. Here is, for instance, one of his poems, suggested by one of Beethoven's Quatuors. In the original the very words seem to acquire an unexpected radiance and a transparent fluidity until they dissolve in whispered sound. The rhyme offers no difficulty, but the vocabulary, alliterations and the rippling of sound can only be fully appreciated in Flemish:

Once there fell a little leaf on the water
Once there lay a little leaf on the water
And flowing over the little leaf was the water
And the little leaf was floating on the water
And wibble-wabble-wallowing on the water
The little leaf was rippling like the water
As lissom and as fluid as the water

.

And blue and blank and greenly blinking was the
water

The little leaf laughed and laughing was that water
My soul now was that little leaf and that water
The liquid tinkle of two harp-strings was that water
And ethereal in blue shimmer and in that water
So I lay in the limpid Heaven of that water
The deep blue radiant Heaven of that water
Once there fell a little leaf on the water
Once there lay a little leaf on the water.

In the original this poem, written in 1859, has no punctuation of any kind. It will scarcely satisfy those who look in poetry for abstract "ideas," for "meaning," for it is one continuous flow of rippling music and quivering color, a delicate wimpling of playful sunbeams on a translucent brook. But as an impressionistic and musical mood-painting it is strangely "modern."

In most of his work Gezelle is indeed a most remarkable precursor of the new tendencies in European literature. Decades before Verlaine had ruled "*De la musique avant tout chose*," he wrote poems in a rhythm purely musical. As for individuality of vision and diction,—the fundamental dogmas of all modern art,—he possessed both instinctively. Guided only by his artistic sense, without connection with any poetic school, he discovered and applied all the other tenets of modern European poetry: originality of image and rhyme, introduction of new poetical terms, freedom of rhythm, until he almost wrote free verse and, in some instances, prose-poems; independence of time-worn rules and restrictions. If modern poetry claims as its principle the bringing out of the in-

dividuality of the poet, no longer fettered by traditional forms; if freshness of vision and sincere novelty of diction are the necessary prerequisites of every work of art, then Guido Gezelle has a right to the name of "modern poet." His poetry is "essentially modern in the white heat of its ecstasy, in the almost unconscious magic of its rhythms, in the quivering tenderness of its feeling." (J. Bithell).

In some respects, however, Gezelle differs widely from the last as well as from the present poetic generations. He is a simple-minded believer and reveals not even a faint suggestion of the religious unrest of modern times. He is no individualist, no analyst of the ever-shifting fluctuations of his "ego" like so many of the modern poets. He is no subtle observer of strange mental phases. His poetry is a song for the pure of mind and heart, for those of "good will," a song of spontaneous naïveté, and yet highly artistic. His is not Maeterlinck's painfully minute observation of varying moods, which, like rare flowers of an hour, fill the dusky rooms of his consciousness with an enervating fragrance, whispering in the faint melody of a vague and plaintive song. He is the poet of the open air and the golden rustling wheatfields, the poet of the sensuous communion with the earth, the trees and the plants, of the mystical communion with God, who animates the visible world and holds it in his direct paternal care. His outlook is not limited by any egotism. He possessed qualities infinitely more precious than intellectualism: an all-embracing love for the visible world and the divination of the mystical secret beyond reality. His picturesque words smell of the ground, the dew and new leaves; they speak of tree and shrub, of simple flowers; they imitate the dancing sing-song of children, whose voices sound silvery in the evening; they echo the

nightingale and the capricious babbling of brooks.

What distinguishes Gezelle's lyrics is, in the first place, their realism. They sprang from close and ever fresh observation of real nature, from a life among the hard-working peasants. He never sketches artificial visions of a conventional country, seen thru the eyes of other poets, literary reminiscences of pastorals, vaguely Virgilian. Nothing is easier, in nature poetry, than to rhyme empty imitations with freedom, fluency and finish. How many poets and poetasters bring us, under pretext of describing the pageantry of Spring and Autumn, nothing more than an eternal repetition of stereotyped phrases about flowering meadows and sweet-singing birds, woven together laboriously at the desk, the windows closed and the fragrance of flowers replaced by the smoke of a cigar! Work your way, if you can, thru these mountain-slides of polished rhetoric, musty and dry repetitions of conventional feelings, which leave in the mouth a taste of ash:

Vallons délicieux, fraîche et riche verdure,
Bondissante cascade a l'éternel murmure,
Doux prés, rians coteaux, magnifiques vergers,
Parés d'arbres en fleurs, rivaux des orangers.
(Chénédollé).

The essential shortcoming of this false-ringing and empty pseudo-literature consists in its lack of direct observation: The poet has seen nature only thru his literary reminiscences, pale copies of unnatural originals, sometimes, still blurred by the vagueness of an artificially aroused "sentiment."

It was to this all too common type of easy writing that Verlaine alluded "Que ton vers soit la

bonne aventure, qui s'en va fleurant le lys et le thym et tout le reste est littérature!" Literature in this sense is opposed to sincerity and indicates the lifeless productions of this peculiar perversion of mind, which prevents so many writers from observing nature independently and not thru the colored classes of the emotions which their readings aroused. The "literary" poet may believe himself sincere. Some comedians even become so imbued with the emotions they represent that they actually weep, in reality, under the impulse of imaginary emotion. Direct observation and direct emotion, second hand observation and imaginary emotion; these distinctions mark the abyss separating the poet by God's grace from the clever versifier of ingenuous imitations. But Gezelle sees. Even his weaker verse has unmistakable qualities of direct observation, of scrupulous truth. Nature is not for him an obligatory theme for rhetorical exercise; not the background for his dreams, as with Shelley, who transformed reality into splendid but visionary landscapes. Gezelle is a man "For whom the external world exists." He paints it with patient precision and striking veracity. Read, for instance, this description of a peasant working in the field:

The Spade.

"How does this spade thus gleam to me, when you, O Peasant, bending your wiry neck, and slowly backward stepping, upturn, now here, then there, God's field."

"The sunshine follows you step by step and throws upon your glittering spade, while deep you

sigh and stoop and bend, the fiery glare of her almightiness."

"And delving in this sparkling flame, your ever busy steel again turns up the earth and sweeps the arrows of flashing sunlight back to me."

"There gush up from the swarthy ground so many beams of blinding light around your spade that it almost seems an image of the fearful lightning of the Lord."

"But no! The doves, they know so well: that play of a spade and a game of light this lightning is, and their whirring wings pursue you while you labour there."

He describes the doves in the courtyard of a Flemish farm:

"Out! There they come all, out they are flapping, fluttering then with all their feathers; echo rattles far and wide, and the sky's deep blue hovers grey with whirring wings. Three times they turn round and three times back, so flies the flock, swiftly on, till where it can find something to pick; then, hark: their rustling plumes all peeping and as if their wings were sleeping in the languid, languid slide, so they glide now here below, and . . . before their little red feet touch the earth, all airy straws, chaff and dust and down and motes puff away from under their beating wings."

Or the restless leaves of the "Checkered poplar trees" a poem, as impressionistic as any modern work:

"White as wool and green together heave the checkered poplar leaves. Ever awake like a ticking clock, they wobble-wabble to and fro, from

above all a shimmer of green, milk white, immaculate from below. Unpeacable they quiver and oscillate in the capricious dance of a fitful breeze. Alternating up and down wave the leaves like a bird's feather. High in the air gleams a flock of doves feathered white and grey like checkered poplar leaves."

However exact and tangible in vivid observation, Gezelle is not a mere realistic painter, who reproduces nature coolly and dispassionately, with photographic precision. He feels that his soul is bound with thousand links of sympathy to all that exists, even to the humblest objects and animals. He pities the chirping sparrows, "God's dear sparrows" as he calls them, when snow decks the field where they found their daily grain; he pities the thistle "poor thistle no man's friend;" he pities the hawthorn, imprisoned among heaps of rank-smelling barrels near an oil-factory:

The Hawthorn.

"That humble old hawthorn there, despised and uncomforted, buried amidst the barrels of the oil-factory, he knows: It is Summer now; and would he, would he not blossom, now that all that flower is blooms in glory?"

Piled up all around him are barrels, barrels, which sweat out ranky oil and stink. And chimneys too, from, the roof of the oil-factory gush over the tree nothing else than bitterness and smoke.

And yet, blossom he will and shall there, and turn, in joyful offering, toward the sun, the gladness of his heart: for only once a year can sum-

merlight rejoice him. Let him then gladly flower in the prison of all these barrels there!

He blooms and is dressed up in white garlands, on either side; an hoar-frost of shivering flowers hides his crumpled slanting branches; the little bees I see that sip pure honey in these cups, inside the blossoms and out, inside and out again."

He loved the trees like living beings and, in many songs, he deploras their sufferings at the hand of man. And,—notice!—the reason for this pious feeling is that "God's hand lives in their trunks." And that God gave us eyes: "to discover Him in the glorious pageant of the trees." This note points to the mystical reasons for his love for nature:

"Have pity for the trees and leave their bark uninjured; protect them against the pain of biting wounds of nails! No pitiless harsh man may torture them to death. Give freedom to the Creator's hand which subsists in their trunks."

Gezelle's sentiment for the life of simple things and animals is also found, in a similar degree, in one of the most gifted of modern French poets, Francis Jammes. Both poets have a common hatred for highly elaborated "literary" language. Jammes expresses what Gezelle could have said: "My God You have called me among men. Here I am. I suffer and I love, I have spoken with the voice which You have given me. I have written with the words which You taught my father and my mother, who transmitted them to me." Like Gezelle Jammes is a believer, a Roman Catholic, and lives likewise in a village, away from the noise and the smoke of the cities. The same simple and

loving vision of nature inspires their songs: everything on earth is beautiful and living,—God's light glows thru all creatures like a lamp's shimmer behind blurred window panes. God is near to them. A confident familiarity with things divine pervades their humble life. And a tender sense of sympathy for plants, shrubs and animals is one of the virtues of their Franciscan soul. Jammes prayed to pass into Heaven with the asses:

..... et faites que, penché dans ce séjour des âmes
sur vos divines eaux, je sois pareil aux ânes
qui mireront leur humble et douce pauvreté
à la limpidité de l' amour éternel."

Their mysticism is not a succession of super-sensuous visions as with Blake, but remains realistic in character and does not disdain the lower forms of life. When Jammes' dog died, the poet prayed for him:

Ah! faites mon Dieu, si vous donnez la
grâce
de Vous voir face à Face aux jours d'
éternité,
faites qu' un pauvre chien contemple face
à face
celui qui fut son Dieu parmi l' humanité."

Gezelle prays that the sparrows be spared the rigours of the Winter-frost:

"White lies the snow now everywhere, so white as were't a shroud. How will God's dear birds find and bare their daily bread? They twinkle and they chirrup loud, they seem in peace to saunter . . . O Lord! Spare Thy feathered folk the harshness of the Winter!"

If Gezelle and Jammes have no broad outlook, no universal sympathies, no diversity of outside interests; if their minds do not seem to embrace a wide circle of ideas, if they are narrowed down to their own land and life, they gain in intensity of nature-vision, in flaming heat of prayer what they lose in breadth and universality. One would say: they gain in height. If their vision does not stretch out horizontally to the frontiers of the world and the mind, it climbs higher, nearer to God, it descends deeper into their own hearts and into the life of all which surrounds them. They make humble things stand forth in undreamed-of splendour; they touch the plain sights and sounds of nature with the vivifying rod of universal life. They love with an almost pantheistic passion the beauty of the external world which bears everywhere the revealing imprint of God's hand. Jammes describes Orthez, Gezelle describes Flanders. But one rose evokes all summer and in a small shell one hears, imprisoned, the choir-voices of all the seas and their immensity. And so they contemplate universe and heaven within the daily simplicity of their surroundings. They are mystics and yet human to the core. The ever-changing aspects of the earth are to them a sensuous delight.

Gezelle's art reveals an exceptional susceptibility to the impressions of ear and eye, and even an indulgence in the pleasures of sense-perceptions. He is finely scrupulous in the noting of nature sounds in all their varying shades. The more subtle distinctions of his sound imitations are necessarily lost in translation and can only be fully appreciated in the original language. He listened attentively to the separate melody of each instrument in the symphony of nature: the drowsy croaking of the frogs; the fire-spattering chirruping of the

exultant sky-lark; the sepulchral yawl of the owl; the sharp laughter of the wood-pecker; the buzzing hum of the wasps; the shrill insistent crepitation of the grass-hopper's scream; the whirring wings and the cooing of the doves; the astonished cackle of the hens; the ever-changing warbling and ululation of the nightingale in the langourous afternoon:

The Nightingale.

Where hides this loud-voiced singer now, which I rarely see, but joyfully hear, concealed in blossoming bough, this May-day morning clear?

Where does he hide? No bird I see. But I hear quavering, quavering the melody that he merrily weaves: It echoes in lanes and leaves.

So sits and sings a man in delight, early mornings, on the loom, to twine from good woof, cloth winding and wide and linen long and fine.

And a bird there sits in the summer cool, and throws out from his rustling stool of green leaves, in the shade, his thousand-colored thread.

Hark! Lissom, light and loud in his voice, how deep do life and lust rejoice, as from the depths resounding of thousand pipes and organs!

Now he chirrups fine, then carols loud and sound then spouts and gurgles out, as water bubbles, clear chiming bells, rolling from roofs in water wells.

Now tell! How clicks his sprinkling sound, as when in a marble cup, unbound, garlands of pearls, blue blinking, loose from the string, are tinkling."

Not less felicitous in exactness is Gezelle in noting colors and shades in nature than in the description of the sounds of the woodland. His intense color vision betrays the pictorial instincts of the Fleming, which for centuries triumphed in the various Flemish schools of painting since the time that Jan van Eyck, in Bruges, invented oil colors. The air of the plain of Flanders, unceasingly swept by the winds of the sea, is saturated with moisture, refracting the light and spreading an ever-varying iridescence over the landscape. Taine, in his "*Philosophie de l'art*" has pointed out the importance of the Flemish landscape in the formation of the Flemish artists: "Outside the cities as inside their walls, everything is a subject for painting; one has only to copy. The general green of the field is neither crude nor monotonous; it is varied in shades by the divers degrees of ripeness of foliage and plants, by the varying thickness of their masses and by the perpetual changes of the moisture and the clouds. It finds its completion or its contrast in the blackness of the storm clouds, which suddenly break in showers and in downpours; in the vague blueish network of mist hanging over the background of the horizon; in the glittering tinsel of the light, imprisoned in the flying vapors, sometimes in the dazzling satin of a motionless cloud, or some sudden cleft thru which the azure of the sky gleams. A sky so full of color, so varying, so suited to harmonize, change and bring out all the tonalities of the earth and the fields is a real school for colorists."

Succeeding generations on the Flanders soil cultivated unconsciously the aptitude for color perception and, by the combined experience of his ancestors, the Flemish artist has become an instinctive colorist. This accumulation of acquired qualities

manifests itself in all Flemish writers, whether they express themselves in French or in Flemish, whether they follow the exuberant school of Rubens or the mystical tendencies of Memlinc, Van der Weyden or Petrus Christus. None of their traits are so distinctive and predominant as their sense of the exact outline and their pleasure in riotous coloring, to which, in fact, they sacrifice rigorous methods of composition and the latin equipoise and harmony of construction. To take the nearest example, read this description from Camille Lemonnier's "Un Mâle": (A Morning).

La laiteuse clarté bientôt s' épanchait comme une eau après que les vanes sont levées. Elle coulait entre les branches, filtrait dans les feuilles, dévalait les pentes herbues, faisant lentement déborder l' obscurité. Une transparence aérifia les fourrés; les feuilles criblaient le jour de tâches glauques, les troncs gris ressemblaient à des prêtres couverts de leurs étoiles dans l' encens des processions. Et petit à petit le ciel se lame de tons d' argent neuf. Il y eut un chuchotement vague, indéfini dans la rondeur des feuillages. Des appels furent sifflés à mi-voix par les verdiers. Les becs s' aiguisaient, grinçaient. Une secouée de plumes se mela à la palpitation des arbres; des ailes s' ouvraient avec des claquements lents; et tout d' une fois, ce fut un large courant de bruits qui domina le murmure du vent. Les trilles de fauvettes se répondaient à travers les branches; les pinsons tirelirèrent; des palombes roucoulerent; les arbres furent emplis d' un égossillement de roulades. Les merles s' éveillèrent à leur tour, les pies garrulèrent et le sommet des chênes fut raboté par le cri rauque des corneilles.

Toute cette folie salua le soleil levant. Un

rais d' or pale fendit l' azur, semblable à l' éclair d' une lance. L' aurore pointa sous bois rejaillissant en éclats d' étincelles comme un fer passée sur la meule. Puis une illumination constella les hautes branches, ruissela le long des troncs, alluma les eaux au fond des clairières, tandis que des buées violettes rampaient au bas du ciel. Au loin, une lisière de futaie sembla fumer dans un brouillard rose. Et la plaine était toute pommelée d' arbres en fleurs qui, à chaque instant, s' éclairaient un peu plus."

Gezelle's verse shows the same vivid and pictorial precision the same sensitiveness to color and sound. He notices the paths of the wood in autumn, tiger-skinned in fallow and brown-yellow spots by soaking rain; the blue-cheeked cloud, half white around its borders; the tired yellow-green meadows by the end of the summer; the rhythmic sweep of the glittering scythe thru the swath; a water-drop reflecting a thousand colored light; the spade of a delving peasant; the silver-grey willow trees, wetting their low hanging branches in a mirroring brook; the light in all its changes from hesitating pallor to burning gold or to the tragical purple of sunsets.

Red is the color dominating in this poem:

Evening.

"Red is all that I see: one oven fire the West is, wherein the sun has sunk and set aglow the old moats of the world. No flaring, flashing fire; nothing but glowing red—and, thru the loose, drifting, clouds something like oozing blood,

or like infinities of skinless body-parts of oxen and of steers, which, floating everywhere, fill with slaughterhouse carcasses the deep seas of the western world. The black hedges seem full of fiery eyes as of strange animals and undefined beings, which view me with a strange red stare, where I stand from head to foot plashed over with the oozing blood of the sun."

Or this description of the trees in the autumn:

Trees in the Autumn.

"O trees, that wait your death sentence in many-colored gowns of autumn, and that dead and under the spell of malediction will stand naked and black all winter long!—O trees, how gorgeous, over-gorgeous is your variegated foliage, which dying, and in the flare of the sun is more splendid than living leaves! Some stand there respectably grey; some stand there fallow and darker blue; some stand there as enormous poppies so fiery and so full of reddish glare. Some are there, chequered and speckled with yellow-red and dark green leaves, like a pile wherein the fire glows by night and leaps out thru dark stones. Blackberry red, and iron-mould, and weaker maroon rests the foliage there, with darker depths, pits black as jet darkly hidden between the branches. But, poplar trees, albe all is dear to me the tinsel of your pale and dying gold which brightens thru all the darker wood"

ezelle's landscapes are the landscapes of Flanders. They are neither abstractly picturesque, reposed and neatly trimmed like the setting of the

pseudo-classics, nor landscapes of hazy gold-mist like those of Poussin or Turner. They never approach even the visionary Edens, the dreamlike, vagueness of Shelley's scenery or the conventional cardboard setting of the Romantics: shadowy valleys, foaming cataracts, rugged crags, dark pines. The Romantics do not describe directly the outer world; their landscapes are drawn merely as a back-ground to emphasize the mood of the poet. Without roots in direct observation, they remain somewhat factitious in their forced conventionality, and could, without changes, be transported, at will, to any country of the temperate zone. Gezelle's descriptions fit exactly only one part of the globe: the wind-swept plain of Flanders. They are recognizable, accurate and even minute. They are inspired by the color, the sound, the fragrance, the light, the atmosphere of Flanders, by its mists and shadows, its hills and fields, by the manifold aspects of its sky.

Some of his poems tell about the ancient legends of the people, tinged still with memories of the Germanic Mythology: in the clouds he beholds the Weather-wives riding, the primitive conception of the battle between Winter and Summer is dear to him; and he narrates, in jesting banter, the deeds of God Thor and St. Peter in Flanders. The old customs of his country inspire this lover of Folklore continually. Many of his verses possess the homespun qualities, the effortless rhyming of old folk-songs. He listened to the quaint Christmas-carols, the old ballads, the love songs and the mystic hymns dating from the Middle Ages but still living in the Flemish towns and villages. He loved Flanders in its external beauty as much as in its language, customs and past, with an almost

sensuous love. He delighted in the smell of the earth and the leaves of the forest after rain; in the pulpy juiciness of sun-caressed fruit; in the hazy sultriness of noon; in the still pools where small spiders run in an almost imperceptible ripple; in the spell of soundless winter plains. He feasts his eyes on the blue fields of flax, the acres of pale golden barley; on the slow-driving cloud masses silvered on the brim, in the endless sky of Flanders. He tastes the fragrance of the winds carrying a faint suggestion of the salty smell of the near-by sea, or the perfumes of dying flowers, heavy in the dusky gardens. One would fancy that he is gifted with a kind of plant-like absorption of nature. To what an ecstasy of thankfulness he could be lifted by the simple taste of ripe cherries!

A Bunch of Cherries.

"A bunch of cherries, child! A bunch of cherries, child! Grown in the glow and the golden light of the summer! Full of squirting juice, full of sweet, full of sour, full of oozing juice, full of sweetness!

They glittered in the branches, they called out where they grew: Pick us! pick us! Pick us and quench your thirst. Ripe we are and shining!"

Low-bowing they hung, swinging and wagging in the wind, the soft warm wind of the summer.

"Pick us, pick us, pick!" they called, and I picked them and they weighed so heavy: the blessing of God weighed upon them.

"Take and thank Him, who grew them, who let them ripen. Thank Him, Thank Him. Thank Him!

Look up to the sky. There He is, there is GOD!

The eyes gleaming upwards as a bird that drinks and lifts its innocent little head . . . Thank Him . . . Thank Him . . . Thank Him . . .

True as the poorest animal, true as the leaves and the fruit, true as the little flower, true as the grain of sand, thank Him!

O enjoy them! It is so sweet, it is so sweet to press out the fruit that is full-ripe and to feel rising in the heart, joy and thanks!

Learn that tongue that speaks with thousands of mouths, calling: "Thanks to God, Thanks for light Thanks for light and for life. Thanks for the air and the light and the hearing and seeing and all! Thanks to God!

A bunch of cherries, child, a glowing bunch Thank Him!"

The vivid sensuousness of the Fleming is the source of his intimacy with nature, which, indeed, resembles in its violent love the pantheistic adoration of the primitive. He feels and describes the vague languors and discontent of the spring, when the chestnut trees are adorned with small white candles; the exaltation of the highest summer-glow; the silence of the wide shroud of the Winter, muffling and deadening the sounds of nature. He listens to the restless rustling and the whispering of the winds of Flanders, to the sighing poplars, blurred with greyish fogs, marking the hidden roads of the plain. He seems, in a sense, to imbibe the life of nature, to drink eagerly from the sources of the all-pervading joy of existence.

"There is, one would say, something of a satyr in this Flemish curate, when he sits enraptured, hidden in the wheatfields, looking far over the billowing cornfields, guzzling the spicy air and the fragrance of earth and fruits." (Kalf).

"The Sun Arrows."

Hidden deep in the ranky green of horsebeans and of growing wheatstems, how delirious is it then to breathe and fill one's soul with new-born life! And I would stand here, stay here steady, so long as the light would give me days! The sun sits high there, above my head, as lightning. The rain of glittering sparks bounds on; it is near noontide now. I bathe in wavering fragrance entrancing as from lilacs.

The earth is dry, yet moist; beneath the fields is hidden still lusty strength which colors the fresh grown boughs and the flowering fields everywhere. Now I can sit where my heart desires! The green is lulled in the quiet air. But the arrows of the sun do pierce me thru and thru and light here in my limbs the violence of life, which streams from the depth of heaven. It gives me a strange delight, and now I feel liquid fire running thru my veins!"

Gezelle's nature verses ring responsive to spontaneous and unpretended feeling, to genuine observation. They have a quality of native naiveté, a truthfulness, which makes us visualise the poet behind his work: the simple-minded and devout undercurate, walking in the country, reading in a cloister garden, saying mass in his village church,

spying on the birds, participating in the amusements of the humble. One feels how he was simple and forgotten, with no other earthly possessions than a breviary, a cross and an old greenish cassock. He lacks entirely that instinct for attitudinizing which so strongly affected Chateaubriand, Baudelaire, Byron and Hugo. He does not pose as a "beautiful soul," but writes simply about his daily life, without false finery and, in general, without romantic "thrill." His reaction to nature would be best described as impressionistic, referring especially to his lifelike exactness in noting concrete reality. His verbal innovations in Flemish poetry are born of his constant care to transcribe what he saw and felt in picturesque and living words. Every one of his nature poems depicts a nook of Flanders seen in a mood. They are never artificial or bookish, never dusty and dry, never a spiritless mannerism, but naive, exactly and vividly realistic. He stands before a nest of blackbirds in a willow trunk and laughs in childlike joy, observing the capricious gamboling of the young birds. He notes how the black letters of his breviary become red and gold when he glances at them after staring in the blinding glare of the sun. He notices the flat pennies, the round spots of moss, green, fallow and yellow on the bark of trees or on the old stones of a bridge.

"Without lies and without cheating, wild truth is what I desire!" he exclaimed, "and what I do not speak out, I do not have in me! Who shall dare to count this a sin? My heart and my soul, my song and my self,—it is all on the outside as it is from within: All lies there bare on my hands! Then away with the glittering lies of thoughts borrowed from another! Mine you are not—Yours I

never shall be! Impersonal feelings . . . I bid you farewell Go and travel!"

His power of realistic description does not prevent the free play of his poetical fancy and oftentimes he clothes his impressions of nature in happy personifications:

"The Cherry-Tree."

The cherry tree in bridal robes, is glittering fair, for it is May-day now and he must go to a wedding-feast.

Every branch is like a poniard now, deep-hidden, white,—from hilt to point, in a gleaming sheathe of flowers bright.

With hoarfrost decked, his beauty shone in winter lands. A thousand times more beauteous now his blossoms shine!

In wintertime his beauty was like a sculpture cold, image of death, strange and vain, as shadows old.

No longer stands like marble cold nor ghostlike he—but he is all that is gay and sparkling: a living loveliness.

It is wedding day and Summertime: The summer maid awaits her bridegroom now, the glorious God, who will make her his chosen bride."

But his healthful joy in creation was far from being purely sensuous and instinctive. It was pointed out above how it was made sublime by a universal

love for all existing things. Gezelle listened not only with the ears of the body, saw not exclusively with the eyes of the body, but listened with the inner ear of poets and mystics, looked with the eye of the seer:

"When the soul is listening, all speaks a tongue that lives. Even the faintest whispering talks and soul-sound gives. All the rustling tree-leaves flutter and babble silvery and waves of pure streams murmur loud their ecstasy. Winds, meadows and clouds clear, white paths of God's holy Feet, whisper all and tell us the deeply hidden word, so sweet. . . . When the soul is listening. . . ."

Nothing on earth is without a soul, and therefore Gezelle approached every plant, stone and animal with brotherly love and respect. He taught us, that, poetically speaking, nothing can be so new and fresh as the very objects we behold daily, the very things which, tired of their humble appearance, we have neglected while hunting for strange and rare beauty in the limitless lands of imagination.

And because Gezelle perceived the "soul of things," because he felt the Creator behind the creature, the aspects of the world kept for him their original purity and beauty. It is given only to a few to live without their senses and their heart growing old and cold, and to remain always vivacious and responsive to all impressions, receiving them with a kind of grateful wonder like children do on each new morning of their existence.

In this way the very mysticism of Gezelle was identified with his reverence for nature. His longing for the Beyond did not destroy or dwarf that

fullness of life that sang in his verses, but exalted it, because the humbleness of his daily existence was ennobled by a distant glimmer of the eternal.

In life and art a perplexing choice seems imperious: we have to forego either the world, with its tempting beauty and its caressing happiness, or God and the joy of celestial aspirations. But for Gezelle this dilemma did not exist. He loved intensely both God and the world and reconciled the apparent contradiction between the sensuous delight in earthly beauty and the yearning for the eternal from the lofty point of view of the mystic.



IV. Guido Gezelle, The Mystic.

In stating that Guido Gezelle is a "mystic" poet, one risks misunderstanding. The writers and philosophers who have dealt with Mysticism betray in their very definitions how vague is its connotation, how uncertain its meaning. It is taken as a synonym, sometimes, for fantastic and visionary theories about religion, or for Neo-Platonism, or for Deism, for a poetical state of mind à la Bernardin de Saint Pierre. It is applied indiscriminately to any of the various ways,—nimble fancy of poetical philosophers or inspired visions of saints,—in which man has expressed his dim or glorious consciousness of the "Beyond". Besides, the mystical ages have past, whatever hopes we may harbor for their revival!

Modern mysticism has sadly degenerated, and in fact has become, in modern literature, nothing more than an intellectual state of mind, a literary attitude, wherein modern esthetes indulge with a dilettante voluptuousness. Under their influence the vague term "Mysticism" is still more vaguely and inconsistently applied, till it designates now almost anything from mystification up to estheticism ofameleon-like variety. How many clashing theories are labeled with this everready word? How many a writer is baptized a "mystic" when he is

simply mysterious or symbolic, elusive in thought and form!

However inclusive and elastic the definition of Mysticism may be, it seems strange to classify together types so widely divergent in spiritual atmosphere as William Blake, Ed. Schuré, Plotinus, Coventry Patmore, Maeterlinck, Hello, St. Francis, Edwin Arnold, Dante, the Buddhists, Mme. Guyon, Wordsworth, Meister Eckhart, William Law, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Villiers de l' Isle Adam, St. Theresa, the Verlaine of "Sagesse," the Misses Besant, Jacob Boehme, Thomas à Kempis, the theosophists and so many others.

"Mysticism" is a term designating spiritual experiences of a bewildering variety, not only different in degree, but even in kind. The aspiration of the Buddhists towards absorption into nothingness is essentially different from the Christian aspiration towards a full flowering life in God. What they have in common are certain practices of asceticism, used as means, however, to ends as widely divergent as are life and death. The confusion is such that one might almost forgive the Philistine for calmly asserting that Mysticism is nothing else than brain-fever; for preferring the comfortable notion of a conventional God for the average man to the glowing intensity and the God-intoxication of the Mystics. For these reasons it is necessary then to indicate what is meant by "Mysticism" here.

No doubt, the Infinite may be approached by the various roads which Plotinus enumerates in his "Letter to Flaccus": "That love of beauty which exalts the poet; that devotion to the One and

that ascent of science, which is the ambition of the philosopher; and that love and those prayers by which some pious and ardent soul tends in its moral purity toward perfection These are the great highways conducting to that height above the actual and the particular, where we stand in the immediate presence of the Infinite, who shines out as from the depth of the soul."

If these are the manifold ways of approaching the Divine, still it must not be forgotten that there exist what the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck has called "degrees of spiritual perfection" (Van de zeven Trappen). Those who stop at the first step can not be called real mystics. They do not contemplate the unity of God with the creation, but rather feel a vague apprehension of a possible super-sensuous secret. They have a dim revelation of God thru an earthly emotion, thru the bodily shudder of the fear of death, or before the beauty of sunsets. But to a true mystic God reveals himself directly in the pure light of the soul. His emotions of the Divine are not vague aspirations, an Unknown, which he fears, but a possession in which he exults, an embrace of celestial joy. Religious sentiment, apprehension of the unknown, "le vague & l' âme," reverence for the pulsating rythm of nature are in themselves no mysticism. They represent rather the eternal aspiration to higher life, inborn in man, which rationalism can starve but not eradicate. And not more are these writers mystics, in the true sense—D. G. Rossetti, Edwin Arnold, Huysmans, etc.—who, by sheer "will to believe" revived only the outward shell of mysticism and reduced it to an artificial half-esthetic, half-religious feeling, an excuse for literature. This "attitude" carried to excess produces comedians of mysticism,

masquerading in frocks of vague Eastern sages, as Sâr Péladan.

Among these interesting dilettanti Maeterlinck occupies a conspicuous place. His agnosticism has been mistaken, more than any other pseudo-mystic doctrine of late years, for the utterance of the flame-winged angels. And lo! His mystical doctrine,—in so far as the silky tones of his meekly submissive vagueness reveal any consistent doctrine!—is almost an eclectic anthology of two or three scores of writers on the subject. This does not lessen the artistic value of his early plays, which are not considered here. But his doctrine is not born of real mystical experience; it is an "attitude of mind"; it lacks the glow of deep-burning life.

Mr. Canroy has pointed out (Publications of the modern Language Association) how we find in Gezelle, in rare cases however, the very same atmosphere of the fear of death as in "L' Intruse," long before Maeterlinck began writing. In one of Gezelle's early poems: "The Child of Death," Death is coming into the house, perceived only by the dying child, gifted with the second sight which Maeterlinck attributes to those who die young. (Les Avertis—Trésor des Humbles).

The Child of Death.

There are some, who, in the lane of life, with scarce a crumb of bread, will go till in their oldest days, will live, in spite of Death.

And there are some, whom this life itself throws from its joyful roads when scarce their travel had begun: the children, they, of Death.

Such a one I knew, and its mother, when she cradled it on her breast, sang and she said: "My little child!"—It was false!—It was the Child of Death.

It grew as a plant may grow, which never sees the sun: A lean and slender child it was and pit-eous as a reed.

Observe it leaning against its house. It rests, now on one foot, then on the other one. It rests there against the wall.

It stands there when the morning beams, and does not speak a single word,—or, may be it talks in a low voice, deep in its heart, and that only God hears it.

It likes to stand there most of all when the sun is about to sink,—a reddish ball in the sky, lurking, aglow, from under the trees, till it slowly disappears.

Then it lifts his staring, wide-open eyes and allows them, over-heavy by pain, to weep the glittering tears, which nobody can understand.

Then it limps away, and it looks, when it is ready to step within, for the last and oh! with so longing a look, while sighing . . . over the road!

And when the wind rattles at the door, then slowly it turns around, comes back, and it shakes its head, and writes—in the ashes it writes then: Come!

So like a child in the evening, joyfully, while dreaming of its playmates it says: "O! That it be tomorrow now!" So it longs for Death.

For Death is kin and friend to it; it knows her

livid hand; it knows her slow, slow step and her voice; it knows her spade and her land.

She tarried, and it waited for her so long. Yet she came all at once, when it stood waiting at its accustomed place, where she found it, yearning for her.

She came and she entered the house and it looked and followed her up, step by step; she went upstairs, it went upstairs; she lay down, it lay down; and she laughed and it laughed for her.

And somebody stood there, who said: O! It laughs! It laughs! What strangeness came over it now? It did now what it never has done: our brother. O! God! it gets well?

And another woman said then there: Ah! That was so strange a smile! So laughed, when he was going to die, my poor husband and he . . Ah!

And fear came in the house and everybody shuddered and hastened and every one ran, now here, then there: and it tolled in the tower and now tinkled the bell. And candles were burning high and clear.

And still . . . a silence fell then, still . . and nothing moved nor stirred—for fear and shuddering reverence by the coming of God . . .

And then whispered a low voice, when again they dared to speak: What is it going, . . . look, what is it going to do? What is it pressing there against its breast?

Ah!—said then another woman, while pointing to the holy Cross: "Give it the Cross! For it is

going to leave . . . It is going to die . . ." And she wept

Then it said, while it stared piercingly and closed,—something?—in its arms: "O! Dear Mother! Bless me with the holy cross!" And the woman had been dead for years!

With its eyes half-open and its mouth half-closed, so it lay then and laughed then and stared. And many who saw it, wondered and said: "How weirdly like life is death."

The peasant stood up for the slow toll, the toll of the bell for the dead. He reflected a while and lifted his head: "It is for the child of death."

And one then sang, whom this life had thrown down, away from its joyful paths: "I hope in a better life than this life of death."

But the note of death is exceptional in Gezelle and his mysticism does not consist in the evocation of a weird atmosphere. Maeterlinck goes thru life haunted by a sense of mystery. The dim day of existence is, for him, still darkened by shadows falling from the Unknown, while for Gezelle life is radiance and joy. He participates in the almost enraptured happiness of the Mystic who has found his God and possesses him thru direct revelation. Gezelle's reverence for the Beyond is not made up of vague undetermined fears for super-sensuous secrets. It reposes on the discovery of the unity of God and the being of soul and world. It is refreshing to read his canticles of gratefulness, his lofty jubilees, the passionate outpouring of his love, after the dusky songs of Maeterlinck, with their visionary strangeness and vague, measureless desire. In turning from Maeterlinck

to Gezelle we feel as if we stepped out from the mouldy and spectral chapels of gloomy cloisters into the refulgent summer of fragrant gardens, alive with blossoms and flowers, the transparent foliage dotted with red glowing roses and the perfumed white silk of lilies.

It is true that if the Mystic experiences joys which no other mortal knows, a foretaste of the perfection of the life everlasting, his existence is also frequently darkened by strange depressions of spirit. In Gezelle's work we find scarcely a trace of these moments of despair. His mysticism was pure love and therefore pure joy:

Joy.

"There are still joyful days in life! How few they be, still there are some of them. And gladly I would give up all and everything for one of these, my God, for a single one of these: When I feel Thee, possess Thee, carry Thee, and, losing my own consciousness, am one with Thyself, not any longer myself. When I call Thee: My God! And, far from suffering and pain, repeat: "God! My God, my dearest Lord!

O remain with me, Thou Sun of all clearness, O remain with me, pierce me with ardent glow thru and thru. O remain with me. One single thing one only is the truth,—and all is lie but Thou.

Thou art my consolation when all human consolation is venom. Thou art my help when no one helps, but flies. Thou art my joy when all other joy is painful; the Hallelujah when everything weeps and sighs

What happens then to me in the wonder of these moments, when my heart glows, my eyes burst forth in tears, till I, drunken with weeping, shudder to unconsciousness on the floor and disappear in a storm of love and happiness?

Am I the one who weeps? Am I the one who in the tongue of the winds hear Thy whisper, my Jesus? Who listens to Thy voice in the voice of everything, however small it be, and perceive Thy own self in each flower? Am I the one who wished for a thousand lives to lose for Thee and for every man on earth, who would so gladly die, in self-forgetfulness and with a radiant smile of joy?"

For many mystics the external world is only a hindrance to spiritual life. The concentration of all the powers of their soul upon the mystical Union with God, by enraptured love and ecstasy, blinds them almost completely to the despised existence in this netherworld. All things of the earth are transitory shadows. Deceptive and lying is their promise of happiness. The sensuous beauty is for many Mystics only a tempting sin, because it distracts them from the contemplation of visions of eternal splendour. Theirs is the jealous God of the hermits of Thebaid. A deep chasm separates their bodily existence from the life of their souls W. Blake said: "I do not behold the outward creation: to me it is hindrance and not action. It is dirt upon my feet,—no part of me" (The last Judgment). And he echoes the feeling of many lovers of the Infinite for whom the visible world is only a symbol of a deeper invisible existence.

However general a manifestation of Mysticism the hatred of the world and things human may be,

it is no essential part of the mystical state of mind. The flame of love which burns indeed with ever clearer and ever higher flame in those elect souls who aspire to the contemplation of God, sometimes reduces to ashes many earthly passions and pleasures; but in many cases, too, it purifies this very sensuous delight and these passions, refines them as gold in the crucible. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Francis of Sales were at the same time both passionate lovers of nature and mystics. Nature, far from distracting their attention from the essentials of spiritual life, showed them, under the fleeing forms of the creation, the unity and the repose of the Creator. All that lives, every object, every plant, every animal, even the smallest and the humblest, are beautiful as the very handiwork of God. They are so many mirrors of His perfection. Did St. Francis not preach to the birds, the fishes and the wolf?

Gezelle's mysticism is of a Franciscan type. He loves nature in all its aspects. The radiance of its beauty is, for him, infinitely vivified by the spirit of God pervading it, as evening light kindles into a thousand mingling flames of color the stained glass windows of a cathedral. In Gezelle's work we find poems inspired by the contemplation of nature only, describing exclusively its outward aspects. Meritorious they are for their originality, and exactness of vision, but even in them one hears, if distantly reverberant, the note of adoration. And, if he disconcerts, in some poems, by his innocent laughter, his buoyant and almost empty gaiety, his toying with glittering rhyme, there still he shows a kind of reverence for nature. In the childlike laughter of that mystic soul is something of the divine simplicity of St. Francis of

Assisi, who taught his disciples to sing and rejoice as the "Mountebanks of God," the "Joculatores domini." His very ecstasy before even the simplest forms of nature denotes how he saw more in them, or behind them, than mere form and color. A spider running on the polished mirror of a pool seems to him to write with its movements, the name of God on the water, a tree turns its blossoms towards its Creator in offering of thanks, the skylark flies up as an arrow to His throne. He saw:

... a world in a grain of sand,
and a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
and Eternity in an hour (W. Blake).

In one of his poems he shows God listening to the sighing of reeds in a brook with the same paternal goodness as to the song of the poet and the plaint of man:

The Rustling of the Whispering Reed.

"O! The rustling of the whispering reed! O!
Could I sing your song of pain, when weak the
winds around you twine and low your bending
heads incline You bow so humbly yielding
down, arise and bow low down again, and bowing
sing that song of pain, that my soul loves, O rust-
ling reed!

O! The rustling of the whispering reed! How
many a time was I sitting still, quite near the lone-
ly waterbrook, alone and by no man disturbed, and
glanced over the wimpling water clear, and watch-
ed your weak wabbling waves while listening to
your song of pain, that you sang for me, O whis-
pering reed!

O! The rustling of the whispering reed! How many a man has passed near by, and heard your singing harmony, but headed not and hastened forth. Away! Where distant goals their hearts enchant! Away! Where yellow gold draws them, Never they understood your murmured plaint, O my beloved, my sighing reed!

But no! Ah, no! my rustling reed, your voice deserves no haughty scorn. God made the stream; God made your stem; God ordered: "Breathe . . . "A slow wind sighed and twined around your stem, which bent and climbed again . . . God listened . . . and your plaintive song brought joy to God, O rustling reed!

But no! But no! Rustling slender reed, my soul does not disdain your voice, my soul which from the same God received feeling, upon His command, that feeling which understands your plaint, when you bend low and raise your heads. But no! Ah! No! My whispering reed, my soul does not disdain your plaint!

That the rustling of the whispering reed may echo in my mournful song! And quivering climb before Thy feet, Thou giver to both of light and life . . . O Thou, who holdest not in disdain the murmur of an humble reed, O do not disdain my humble plea . . . I, poor and pining, plaintive reed!"

Gezelle's thought is not turned wholly inward, to the contemplation of the Divine, but also outward, to Nature, sacred as a reflexion of the infinite. And, as we remarked in the preceding pages, his gaze upon nature is minute, realistic and intense. On the purely descriptive side he is a realist, noting with scrupulous care, sound, color

and form, gazing intently upon every detail of his surroundings, painting them with the richness of a Rubens.

Nothing shows more clearly the nothingness of our labels and psycho-literary distinctions than the fact that in Gezelle are blended harmoniously together an intensive realist and a mystic, types which following our definitions are irreconcilable. The harmony of his soul is not one of contradictions reconciled by intellectual effort as with Goethe, it is a simple, a natural growth: it is the outcome of a naive but intense love for every creature and for God. Gezelle wanted to be nothing more than a flower in God's sunshine, a thing of beauty, the work of God's own hands, always turning towards the sun, towards the Creator.

The highest plane of life is simple and freed from the burdens and ambitions of ordinary existence. In this simplicity live both the saint and the great poet. Delivered from the load of the unessential things of life, they rediscover in themselves the divine sources of eternal childhood. Their high-pitched, eager souls are profoundly naive, and therefore they perceive relations between things, mysterious and grandiose, which only pure eyes can contemplate. They stare at the world with the reverential wonder of a child and feel God's actual presence in its beauty. Every new-born morning is a paradise, every effulgent noon is an endless glory, every evening a fading purple mystery. They feel God in the starry nights, high domes of soundless peace, when the soul in prayer seems to glide over the vast, dark waters of silence. For them,

From sky to sod,
The world's unfolded blossom smells of
God." (Francis Thompson).

Gezelle had the mystic's familiarity with all that is divine. He bids the winds to lull lest they should disturb the sleep of the holy Infant. He thanks God again and again for the daily gifts he has received. He exclaims: "Jesus, mark my head with Thy blood, please. Thy blood on my head, on my forehead. That everyone may see it, so that every one sees: that Thou art mine, that I am Thine."

His was a feeling of the nearness and accessibility of God, whom he did not seek upon transcendent heights of thought; who did not shake the earth in His eternal wrath, but revealed himself in the fugitive laughter of the light on spring days, and in a state of luminous happiness of the soul. Henry Moore wrote about a similar experience in one of his "Mystical Dialogues:" "I am not out of my wits in this divine freedom, for God does not ride me as a horse, and guide me I know not whither, but converseth with me as a friend He that is come hither, God hath taken him to be His own familiar friend; and though He speaks to others aloof off, in outward religions and parables, yet He leads this man by the hand, teaching him intelligible documents upon all the objects of his providence; speaks to him plainly in his own language, sweetly insinuates Himself and possesseth all his faculties, understanding reason and memory. This is the darling of God, and a prince among men, far above the dispensation of either miracle or prophet."

The symbol of God, for Gezelle, is the sun, familiar to mystics as the symbol of the joy of the divine presence. Did Novalis not write?:

and form, gazing intently upon
surroundings, painting them
a Rubens.

Nothing shows more clearly
our labels and psycho-literary
fact that in Gezelle are blended
together an intensive realist and
which following our definition
The harmony of his soul is
tions reconciled by intellect.
Goethe, it is a simple, a natural
outcome of a naive but in
creature and for God. Gezelle
ing more than a flower in God
of beauty, the work of God
turning towards the sun, towards

The highest plane of life
from the burdens and ambitions
ence. In this simplicity live the
great poet. Delivered from the
sensual things of life, they reach
the divine sources of eternal con-
pitched, eager souls are present
therefore they perceive relations
mysterious and grandiose, which
can contemplate. They feel the
reverential wonder of the divine
presence in its beauty. Every
is a paradise, every moment
glory. The evening
feel the presence of God
leaves the soul in a state of

Ego Flos!

is divine. God alone can give me life, and before Thy eyes I blossom,
God again can take me up, and I shall be as Thou, which eternal, never-chang-
ceined. He alone can give me life, and before Thy eyes I blossom,
Thy blood, pure to the very end, after this low life, reserves eter-
nity for me. He alone can give me life, and before Thy eyes I blossom,

Thy light, my joy, my pain, my
Thy love, my only and my all. What
Thou but die a death eternal? What
Thee that I can love and like?

From Thee, albeit that Thou, deep
lives and ever life can give, comest
to me,—and radiatest, O deep-beloved
deepest soul, Thy all-pervading glow.

Unbind me! Unbind my earthly
me and dig me out. Let me go
is summer always and sunlight. Let
where Thou flourishest, eternal, unique
splendour of eternity.

O not before
near Thee, in Thee, if Thou allow-
wretched creature, to taste of Life eternal,
I will resolve myself in Thy eternal

icism was less intellectual than
did not create his own spiritual con-
ehme or Swedenborg, but, like St.
am we have to compare him once
contented with the ancient faith. This
lectual temper is at the same time

**"Nur eine Nacht der Wonne,
Ein ewiges Gedicht!
Und unser Aller Sonne
Ist Gottes Angesicht."**

All thru Gezelle's Books run as a continual thread, hymns and canticles to the light. We find it used symbolically in one of his early volumes: "Poems, Songs and Prayers":

The Sun.

"O Sun, when I stand in my green leaves, my petals full of pearly dew, and you fare forth in splendour, my blossoming heart enraptured gazes on you. When lofty, on the high seat throning of the reddening break of day, forget not the little flower that waits and yearns for you.

O sun, when you climb, never tired, the glittering paths of the sky, I follow you with all my petals, open for you from dawn: Come seek out my heart and find it. Yours it is from immemorial times; you it loves, upon you it gazes,—my Bridegroom from Paradise!

And when in the evening twilight darkens, when you sink in the glowing west, I watch your faint beams fading, and sink down with you to rest. My head lowered upon my poor stem, I weep forsaken all the night. Come, O sun my beloved, I am yearning to revive by your caress!"

And in his last volume he repeats the symbol of sun and flower, more clearly indicated this time:

Ego Flos!

I am a flower and before Thy eyes I blossom, immensely glaring Sun, which eternal, never-changing, allows indulgently me, wretched creature, to flower here,—who after this low life, reserves eternal life for me.

My life lies in Thy light, my joy, my pain, my hope and happiness, my only and my all. What can I, without Thee but die a death eternal? What is there, without Thee that I can love and like?

I am so far from Thee, albeit that Thou, deep well of all that lives and ever life can give, comest nearest of all to me,—and radiatest, O deep-beloved sun, into my deepest soul, Thy all-pervading glow.

O cease! deliver me! Unbind my earthly shackles, uproot me and dig me out. Let me go there where it is summer always and sunlight. Let me haste to where Thou flourishest, eternal, unique Flower, in a splendour of eternity.

Then I will flower before O not before Thy eyes, but near Thee, in Thee, if Thou allowest me, wretched creature, to taste of Life eternal,—if Thou let me resolve myself in Thy eternal light."

Gezelle's mysticism was less intellectual than emotional. He did not create his own spiritual conceptions like Boehme or Swedenborg, but, like St. Francis, to whom we have to compare him once more, he was contented with the ancient faith. This deficiency of intellectual temper is at the same time

Gezelle's great shortcoming and his great gift. It prevented him from fortifying and supporting his emotional mysticism by a frame of ideas, from raising it to the height of the conceptions of Dante, Vondel or Milton, from attaining the higher forms of more intellectual art. But, if he had been gifted with a critical and sharply discerning intellect, besides his outstanding sensuous and emotional powers, would he not have lost that naivete in observation, that directness in his emotions, that childlike faith which are the most precious qualities of his work? A more piercing critical faculty would have modified deeply the tendencies of his naive soul.

His faith and his mystic adoration had no need of the proofs of theology and history. He SAW like all mystics, he perceived and felt the unity of God and the world. What need to prove it afterward by majors and minors? Do we try to demonstrate the existence of the sun by the handy reasoning schemes of logic?

Mysticism, as Gezelle conceived it, is the discovery of the essential unity of the self, God and creation and an aspiration towards identification with this eternal One, thru love.

To the merely religious and even to many mystics, an opposition, a dualism divides God and the creature, soul and body, a painful division and antithesis of the lower and the higher. Gezelle resolved these oppositions into a harmony which does not stand outside of the Roman Catholic church. In his joyful contemplation of creation he remains in accordance with the Greek Fathers as well as with other leading Roman Catholics as, for instance, Fénelon. "The wider our contemplation of creation,

the grander will be our conception of God" said Cyril.

Gezelle's eyes were not blinded to the beauty of the earth, when they were opened to the beauty of heaven. He perceived between the life of the netherworld and the life eternal many symbolic relations. The rebirth of Spring is for him symbol, sign and promise of resurrection; the very birds sing Easter hymns; the nightingale's song is pure "soul fire"; a beautiful leaf sweeps all the harps of paradise into music. His was not the almost Buddhistic body loathing and aspiration toward self-annihilation. And here again he is a child of the Roman Catholic church. His mystical life fitted into the frame of its tradition. It was not a new intellectual doctrine, not the evocation of a vague atmosphere, no sentimental religiosity, no literary "attitude," but a way of living life fully, a definite doctrine, made up of the essentials of christianity. "If hatred and contempt of matter and all connected with it, as proceeding from the principle of evil, characterizes Gnostics, Neo-platonists, Manicheans, Catharists, Puritans and kindred schools, it is distinctive of Christ and Catholic Christianity to recognize body and soul as created by God, each in his image and likeness; to view the flesh as the sacrament and expression of the spirit." (Tyrell—The Faith of the Millions).

Gezelle would have subscribed to the words of Huysmans in his preface to the "Latin Mystique" of Remy de Gourmont (first edition). "L' on peut dire de la Mystique qu' elle est l'âme et qu' elle est l'art de l' Eglise même. Or, elle appartient au catholicisme et elle est à lui seul. Il ne faut pas, en effet, confondre le vague à l' âme, ou ce qu'on appelle l' idéalisme et le spiritualisme, ou même encore le déisme, c'est à dire de confuses postula-

tions vers l' inconnu, vers un au-delà plus ou moins occulte, avec la Mystique qui sait ce qu' elle veut, où elle va, qui cherche à étreindre un Dieu qu' elle connaît et qu' elle précise, qui veut s' abîmer en Lui, tandis que Lui-même s' épand en elle. La Mystique a donc une acception délimitée et un but net, et elle n' a aucun rapport avec les élancements plus ou moins littéraires dont on nous parle."

It was from this point of view that Gezelle looked upon the ceremonies of the church, which for the critical eye of the unsympathizing onlooker might so easily seem fantastic or even ridiculous. They never did lose their lustre and their significance for him and remained free from the wear and tear of a daily familiarity with them, as a priest. He felt vividly their symbolism. He wrote a series of poems called: *The XIV Hours of the bloody Day of our Lord,*" where various personages describe Christ's sufferings: *Magdalena, the Holy Women, the four Evangelists, etc.* His work was here manifestly inspired by the fourteen "stations of the holy Cross," which adorn the walls of all Flemish churches. In another poem he describes the stained glass-windows of the cathedral, full of martyrs, bishops, saints and virgins who are, in the morning resplendent in a glory of sparkling miters, crowns and staffs, silver dresses and purple cloaks, like a multi-colored rainbow. But when the glow of the sun at noon falls thru them, the sparkling of the colors becomes so vivid and so violent that they melt away in white light: "No palms, no staffs, no stoles any more; all is away; melted in one single radiance, in one sun glare, in God." The mystical meaning of this symbol is clear: the souls of the saints in the midday glory of love melt in the light of God.

He depicts the Good Friday service in the Catholic church: the strange mass without bells, without incense, without altarcloth, when the lugubrious plaint of the "Dies Irae, Dies Illa" resounds in the graves under the church-slabs, when purple veils cover all the images and the crosses; when the weird crackle of a rattle announces Doomsday. The clouds of incense become a symbol of the prayer ascending from the fire of his heart.

This feeling of beauty in the acts of his daily existence as a priest shows again how his poetry was connected with his everyday life and not an empty exercise in the voids of abstraction. He felt Divinity always near to him, holding his heart in an eternal embrace: "Deep in myself there speaks and listens One, untouched by darkness, day or death. If I were imprisoned in stone and steel, He still would tread in, alone, and say, even when he found me sleeping: "I am waking."

He found God as the only reality behind the world of the senses, the meaning behind the symbol. Piercing to the mystical kernel of his faith, he went beyond form and letter, realizing the mystical spirit of ceremonies. In this way his mysticism acquires a general human value: it goes down to these essentials which are the same under all the passing forms of religion; it brings us to this uplifting of the soul which is the essence of all prayer and all art.

The white glow of Gezelle's mystical poetry reminds one of the Verlaine of "Sagesse." Physically he resembled the French poet strikingly: the same "tête glabre," the enormous prominent fore-

head and, in his face, deep lines of thought. The differences, however, are not less marked. Over Verlaine's face lies the passionate and disenchanted expression of an old satyr, in whose cavernous eyes still smoulders the spark of lust, of pleasures half desired and half despised. Over Gezelle's features is spread the calm repose of a soul at peace while a more childlike simplicity smiles in his eyes. He was "l'enfant vêtu de laine et d'innocence" that Verlaine vainly tried to be consistently. The soul of the "pauvre Lélian" was made up of unblended contrasts. He was tossed from mystical prayers to all the excesses of the senses; he knew the radiance of God's grace and the enervating languour of the gardens of passion. Gezelle's psychology has a consistent unity and harmony: the unity of deep-living faith. Yet both stood equally pure and simple before the beauty of the world with the earnestness of true poets. They had a common hatred for empty rhetoric, a common preference for "la musique avant toute chose," for an art of delicate word shading, essentially musical in its quivering rhythms. And in both we find that aspiration toward "le moyen-âge énorme et délicat."

The Middle Ages for which their heart yearned was not the Middle Ages of dusty Theology and hair-splitting metaphysics, but that of the Cathedrals, of the mystics, of troubadours and folksong. Verlaine lived in the spirit of this atmosphere only during his crisis of mysticism, Gezelle always remained, in his faith and outlook upon life, a man of mediaeval times. All his life long he bore the mark and imprint of old Bruges and traditional Flanders.

In stressing Gezelle's mediaeval outlook, we do

not wish to convey the idea that he had exactly the current intellectual convictions of those times. In him lingered and survived, however, the emotional states of mind of ages past, as in the very streets and houses of the old cities where he lived, Bruges and Ypres, similar to the fragrance of a perfumed wine still clinging to a marble vase long after the wine had been poured.

To appreciate fully his religious verse, we must cast aside our scepticism, our intellectual unrest, our more or less logical religiosity. His was the simplicity of a soul of the Middle Ages resolving oppositions into harmony, seeing the symbol in the concrete, the ideal in the actual . . . Life and art were one for him as they were for those anonymous builders of the Cathedrals, whose work expressed the soul of a people rather than that of the individual. So Gezelle expressed the soul of Flanders, in both its sensuous and its mystical tendencies.

The singular charm of his work, like that of his personality, lies in the harmonious union of love of the Eternal with a lyrical enjoyment of the outside world. Nature appeared to him in the simple beauty of innocence, in the holiness of God's own love, as on the first glorious day of creation. And each creature had a voice of praise for light and life. From the clod up to the stars sounded audibly to his soul an eternal and lofty jubilee, the Canticle of unity. Beyond the ever wavering change, behind the ever ebbing forms of life, he felt the restful peace of God's undisturbed existence.

So he lived simply and beautifully with the confidence of a flower in the sun. He repeated

it so many times: "Ego Flos" "I am a flower". And no better symbol can be found for him. As a flower Gezelle was rooted in the very ground of his land, and sucked his strength from the sod of his own country. He followed naturally his instinct for beauty, as a flower grows simply and is an astonishing wonder. And as the flower turns its heart towards the sun and follows it up in its course, so he turned his soul toward the light of God.

And when flowers have withered and died, a fragrance still remains and floats in the air, the faint perfume of their beauty. So his existence as a poet seems to have left a fragrance undying in the air of Flanders.

His life and work are a lesson for our anxious times of intellectual unrest. He did not despise life with the sardonic smile of the cynic, he was not crushed by it into weak hearted melancholy, he did not make light of it with blasphemous mockery, nor secluded himself in a palace of dreams. His existence was a luminous synthesis of God and the self and the world, a synthesis wherein the sublime was simple: a union of the soul of a child and the soul of a saint.



returned
specified

